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Dr. Cliona Doris

This is Yvonne Desmond in conversation with Dr Cliona Doris the Head of Orchestral Studies in the DIT Conservatory of Music and Drama.

The date is the 10th of December 2012 and the time is 12.15pm.

YD: Welcome, Cliona, and thank you for agreeing to this interview. Could you just tell me a little about your interest in music and did that start from a very early age?

CD: Yes it probably did, although you never really understand why or you never realise what you're going to be interested in. But I did start music lessons very early, piano firstly. In fact, all my siblings were interested in music because my parents were interested in music, not professional musicians, but always very interested in it. So I started piano at five or six. The instrument that I now professionally play is the concert harp and I started that aged eleven through the Belfast School of Music. But there was always music in the house and we were always brought to concerts and to hear the Ulster Orchestra. I have many memories of going to concerts and of one particular work, Faure's *Pavane*, which really caught me, - no harp in it though!

YD: And do you remember your first music teacher?

CD: Yes I do, Mrs Stone, she was my first piano teacher and I actually remember the first lesson and the first book *Jibbidy-F* which I think people still use and *Middle C* and all the rest, so I do remember all of that very well. I also remember obviously, my first harp lesson; that was when it really captured me.

YD: What age were you then?

CD: I was aged eleven

YD: It must have been a lot bigger than you, the harp!

CD: It was a lot bigger than me because it was a concert harp and I usually had to pop down to change the pedals. But it was one of the instruments that just captured me and I practiced and practiced. It was one of those things that just sort of crept into my life rather than any conscious decision.

YD: There's a huge discipline in being a performer?

CD: There is and you do need to do plenty of the practice at a very early age. But I often think in my current job now, I'm Head of Orchestral Studies, that [while] I did play violin and piano then, I probably wouldn't have become a musician except I found the instrument that really caught me. I just wanted to practice it and I had excellent teaching actually; a teacher of harp who teaches here in DIT, Denise Kelly. She was my second harp teacher, I had a few lessons with another teacher but she left to go to England. So I had a good teacher, I was very interested in it and my parents were very committed so it just happened.

YD: So did being interested in the harp make you a little bit different from your friends at the time? Can't imagine many of them were doing something similar.

CD: Thankfully, no, I went to two very musical schools. That was why I started violin. I had theory classes with Sr Bridget in my school in Downpatrick [Convent of Mercy Primary School, Downpatrick] and then I went to the Assumption Grammar School in Ballynahinch which was also an excellent music school. In fact, they've just recently been given an Excellence in Music Award, and I was back there doing the graduation speech to them, which was lovely, to have come full circle. So while I was doing music in the School of Music in Belfast, although I was from a different area, there was always music in the schools and singing in the choirs. I remember Sister Dorothy taking us to choirs so I was just surrounded by music. I loved singing in choirs the whole way up as well so I suppose it was very rich. There were a lot of people doing music around me and I probably took it more seriously. I did take it more seriously than the majority in the class but because it was nurtured in both schools I didn't feel very different.

YD: You were fortunate in that really.

CD: Fortunate although as a young child you do have to put the practice in so there are things you have to be quite disciplined in.

YD: And make sacrifices?

CD: You do, but I was very lucky in that I joined The National Youth Orchestra [of Ireland] and music brought me at a very early age to places that I probably wouldn't have had the opportunity to go to otherwise and so it gave back a lot as well. I was just very lucky, it was smooth. But I didn't really think of having a career in it, it was just something I really enjoyed.

YD: So you went on to study music at third level?

CD: I did, I studied in Queen's University in Belfast for three years and in the summers I went and had master classes in Italy and America. I was very thankful that Queen's gave me a Hamilton Harty Scholarship to study for master classes in Indiana University, Bloomington. At that stage I was really looking for postgraduate [options] and for music you need to enrich your horizons and see the world especially in concert harp because there weren't that many taking it very seriously. So I decided to do my masters and continue my doctorate in Indiana University, a wonderful music school and one of the largest harp faculties in the world. There was just every opportunity there, really fantastic academic lecturers who were publishing left, right and centre. Again, this was a very rich environment and I was just very lucky to have that opportunity.

YD: How long were you there for?

CD: I was there full-time for four years and then the fifth year I went back and forward. I had a part-time job in the University of Ulster in a musical education program there when finishing up. So all in all, probably five years to do the Masters and the Doctorate which was quite quick in American terms. There was no wasting time! It was a wonderful opportunity because you could do everything. I played [Britten's] Peter Grimes Opera, I played [in] the New Music Ensemble. I did my research on Irish harp actually [of] the 18th/19th century. There were just lots of chamber music opportunities. It was just a wonderful enriching environment working with some fantastic lecturers.

YD: So you came back to Ireland after that?

CD: I came back to Ireland and free-lanced for about ten years. I did have the job in the University of Ulster, I also taught in The Royal Irish Academy of Music before taking up the post in the DIT in 2005. Again a very rich career balancing research, [recording] CDs, a lot of educational work, a lot of playing and travelling. That really equipped me extremely well for my current role because I am a practitioner, I still play. Obviously I have to be selective now in the projects that I take on. But I had that very rich environment so I do understand the student experience.

YD: Do you think you have to be a practitioner to be able to teach music? And the second question is, can you teach music or is it just technique?

CD: That's a good question! One, yes, I think you have to be a practitioner actually if you're teaching at this level, which is third level right up to doctorate level. You really need to know your subject inside and out. You need to know how to cope and manage with the nerves and you need to know the repertoire inside out, to have played it and performed it and to have a very wide playing experience as a soloist, playing chamber music, playing in an orchestra. They are different skills. Playing new music, recording, teaching, all of that practice, writing the research proposals, getting your funding, all of that. I very luckily had experience in those areas. I ran a major international festival before I arrived in DIT, which was the World Harp Congress in 2005, which was working in an international context as well. So all of those skills I think you do need.

Regarding whether it's possible to teach music, yes, there is a technical grounding which needs to be there for somebody to take it to the very highest level. I think there does need to be an aptitude for it, something quite special, which is the unteachable bit, but it's knowing how to nurture that.

YD: It is a kind of a mentoring process?

CD: Yes, but also there's huge responsibility to make sure that it is really grounded in good technique, that the repertoire is managed. When you see that, it's a wonderful thing to see but it also means there is a responsibility on you and also the responsibility on the student, they still have to put the work in.

YD: And is that the satisfying part you find about teaching?

CD: That, but also when you have a student who's having a difficulty and you follow them through that. There's a broad range of skills and sometimes the ones with the natural talent don't have the commitment whereas others would have the commitment and not so much natural talent, but they actually can sometimes do better. So it's managing all of that. But it's wonderful to see somebody experiencing repertoire that you absolutely adore and have played for so long and they are coming to it for the first time. So it is commitment and responsibility, but you do get moments of joy.

YD: And musicians now are better off in the sense that you can do a lot of your research by practice, it's not as academic as it used to be?

CD: I think there has been a turn in that. I think there has been an acknowledgement of research through practice particularly in music. There are not those boundaries between the standard musicological research and the analytical side. I think there's a much more blended approach and I think we're the richer for it. There are a number of very academic performers out there as well who are bridging the gap.

YD: What's an average day like for you? Do you teach a lot during the week or is it administration?

CD: The job is quite varied and challenging to say the least! I actually put all my teaching on the one day, which is Wednesday, just to focus it. I have quite a varied teaching role because obviously we go from junior right through to doctoral level and all in between.

YD: That must be quite difficult, handling the little ones right up?

CD: It's tricky, and that's why I do nearly all of that teaching. So I have my third level harp students. We have been very fortunate in that we've got a lot of third level, a lot of Erasmus students coming this way as well, and more interest which is great. Then I have an orchestral class where I take all the orchestral students in a performance class. I love that class, it's probably my favourite hour. Just to see them progressing as they are coming up and getting through their anxiety in front of peers. If you can play in that class you're doing OK! It gives me an opportunity to meet the students and to work with them. Then I do a certain number of junior music teaching, I love that too. This means that I'm in all the different calendars that we work.

The Conservatory is quite complex because we are dealing with the very young children with their own needs and requirements and parents and ensembles and all kinds of things, and then the undergraduate and research students as well and all the performances that we do in addition to all of that. We're at the Christmas season at the moment and it's just concert madness plus the junior exams so there's never a dull moment. There is a lot of administration but I think that's the case in nearly every job now not just in education. It's to try and manage it so you don't let it take over but I find the teaching on the one day when I'm in that teaching mode is a better way to do it.

YD: Do you think the fact that we have the children is strength of DIT?

CD: I think it is...if you just take one example. We have a very strong pedagogical strand to our undergraduate programme and I think it's very useful for the lecturers to be involved in the really high quality junior music teaching to that end. But it takes many, many years before they hit eighteen, they need to have an awful lot of work done before they arrive here. That is a responsibility nationally. I'm on the Board of Directors of Music Generation which is funded by a very generous donation from U2 and Ireland Funds, as a Music Network Initiative. Soon we will be starting three more projects so there will be nine projects right throughout the country. It's wonderful now to see music education going out everywhere not just in the big centres. So I'm looking forward to seeing what developments we'll have and what we will see coming through in DIT.

YD: Do you think we need a national music college, that we should all amalgamate together and have one decent college?

CD: I think especially in orchestral studies, it would be useful to have... you need all the instruments, properly resourced and a very high level. I think it probably does need to be looked at in its totality. We work very closely with our colleagues in Cork School of Music, C.I.T and The Royal Irish Academy of Music and in DIT ourselves. They are the three conservatory styles and I think more communication and collaboration would help.

I think we do need a national [music education] programme and I'm delighted that Music Generation is taking that over and the Department of Education has said that they will come in and fund beyond a three year project. So we're very lucky thanks to U2 and the Ireland Fund! It's a seven million euro gift to Ireland really so it's a good news story. There's research going to be done on that as well because obviously it's starting from a very unusual base. A lot of the other European countries have a very strong tradition of the junior school in each local area, we don't. Actually Northern Ireland does. So it will be interesting to see how that comes to fruition in a number of years. It is -a very positive time for music education and it'll be interesting to see how it operates.

YD: Can you just say a little bit more about the U2 funds.

CD: There was a report from Music Network a number of years ago and it was promoting that there would be a county wide music service in each county. There were two pilots sponsored by the Department of Education in Donegal and Dublin and they were researched and the reports came out. Then behind the scenes, U2 gave a gift of five million, the Ireland Funds agreed to raise two million, with the understanding that the Department of Education would come on board. These would be three year projects that counties or joint counties could bid for and they would get seed funding for three years.

The local or MEP (Music Education Partnership) would have to fund fifty per cent of that. It is matched funding. But the seed funding that comes from U2, (the Music Generation funding) will last for three years and then the Department of Education will take over that side. So it is a long term sustainability piece. As a Board we have visited a number of the projects now and it's great to see them coming to fruition, seeing young people getting involved. We're probably two and a half years into the project of a five year project. Beyond that it will be up to the Department. The Department have been very good and they are involved in a lot of on-going meetings. So it'll not be country wide by the end of the five years but it'll certainly make a much bigger impact.

YD: It's very important to introduce children to music isn't it?

CD: The arts in general, sport and the arts, all of that. I know it's very well documented that it helps their other schoolwork but apart from that it provides a long term access to something that is very rich in their lives. I always feel that there can be talented children anywhere. Music has been very good to me but I was lucky to have the opportunity and some children maybe miss that opportunity or they don't get it early enough. That opportunity is not genre specific. This could be pop, rock, jazz, trad, classical. So it will be interesting to see if we have any more U2s!

YD: I thought that was a great thing to see, the Rock Music School.

CD: That's right because, obviously, the Conservatory is classical, traditional. We've an excellent traditional music programme, fantastic, in my department and I'm delighted to listen to them there, they're fabulous and then jazz at Masters level. But there was a difficulty. Often we would have very talented students, particularly guitar students, come in to audition and there wouldn't be a place for them. Now in the BIMM Dublin there is a place for that and they can get their degree through their pop and rock. I always say for your undergraduate degree you should do something you really, really enjoy.

YD: And you've no trouble attracting students to that?

CD: No, huge numbers and at the end of the day it's a level eight qualification. But it's good to see because there wasn't a third level place here and they had to go on to England.

YD: I think it is good to see and it's also music staying relevant.

CD: Commercial Modern Music, very geared to the industry!

YD: As you say it provides an outlet for a certain type of person which it's great to see.

CD: Absolutely, Music Generation is doing this too. I was up in Mayo fairly recently and I think it was the Ballina Arts Centre where they have a room that's kitted out with guitars and recording equipment and drums. It means it's sociable for children as well, it's somewhere for them to gather and experience music.

YD: Because once you're outside the main cities it can be quite isolating?

CD: It can and it's nice for them to meet others and they'll be given training and all of that and, you know, it is all additional skills.

YD: Given the financial climate a lot of schools are finding it hard to maintain music teachers and that kind of thing?

CD: Exactly and the curriculum is a very rich one but it's very hard to deliver it without the expertise. And for a lot of children, it's just another outlet for them. Obviously we're very interested in very high quality teaching at the highest level and then it depends what the young people decide to do with that.

YD: Would you agree that the Arts are somewhat under attack at the moment, financially, in this climate?

CD: Everything's under attack! Although artists tend to be quite entrepreneurial and adept at surviving, we were never really over funded. I have to say now, obviously, I do worry because there has been a lot of very good infrastructure put in place for the arts and you'd love to see that maintained. But there will always be these creative people who will find ways! In fact there have been some amazing projects, large scale opera projects which have been put on and fabulous theatre productions. But obviously I would worry because you need to put the sustainability infrastructure in and if you can't keep that strong then we're in difficulty.

YD: Because everything is getting quite short term now, isn't it?

CD: That is the worrying thing now and especially if you want to work internationally, which we do. You need to have committed funding years in advance whereas one to one, year to year is difficult. I'm on several music boards and you know it's just engaging in planning. Everybody was putting their Arts Council funding in, which comes out in January, and then there is waiting to see what the budget is [for] The Arts Council. That is worrying because there's an awful lot of wonderful people working in the arts and we would hate to lose that creativity.

YD: You talked earlier about research proposals and filling them out and you obviously have a lot of training in that. Initially, was that difficult thing for you? I would imagine that artists hate filling out those kinds of things anyway but they do find it hard in most cases?

CD: I take a very practical view of it, that some you win, some you don't. But there is a skill to filling out an application and partnership and all of that. I think you become very good at it. But it is the one thing I know that our recent graduates say they find the most difficult. Yet they are very good at it. They have a whole range of skills but it's a different one and also involves filling out the excel sheets for the finance. However a lot of musicians love the finance though, they like the figures! But one door closes, another opens and just to keep at it. I fill in a lot of application that go nowhere.

YD: Do you think artists or musicians have a problem selling themselves on paper while most people can talk about it no problem?

CD: I think there're getting better at that. I'm not a great one on social media, one of my skills it is not! But we have a young saxophone quartet [Chatham Saxophone Quartet] who have just been awarded the Young Music Wide through the Music Network scheme. It's for young performers at the early stages of their career, not quite just out of college, because they've been doing a lot of very good work. They have built up their profile. They have worked with the Vanbrugh Quartet here on a string quartet repertoire. Then they won the Galway Residency with the Contempo String Quartet with more professional work. They already had a very strong profile and now have been taken on for three years to manage that. So that's a wonderful opportunity. There are courses through Music Network through different agencies to try and up skill these kind of things because you really have to be quite an entrepreneur. The jobs for life in one of the orchestras when they do come around are very, very few. I always talk about the portfolio career so normally there is some teaching involved. And this is the wonderful thing about music education mushrooming all around the country, there are opportunities. But you need to be quite versatile.

You could be doing one to one teaching, you could be group teaching or you could be working in the community. If you are an entrepreneurial type, you can still practice your art at a very high level but also make a living and that includes a lot more skills than just playing.

YD: How would you like to see your work and that of the conservatory develop in the future? Is it just a question of hanging in there for the moment?

CD: Well, we'll hang in there as well and then try to develop! I suppose I'd like to see us even more outward looking with an even more international focus. Obviously we're moving to Grangegorman in 2017. At the moment we're working out of several buildings. I always think we have wonderful students, they are very well rounded students and it's very interesting to see where they are heading and making connections. But I would like to see us with more international students, we've quite a few already but I'd like to see that because I think it raises the level. I think the new facilities will make a big difference because we'll all be in the same place and also we'll be next door to our Art and Design colleagues and our Media colleagues and that's where things are going.

YD: That's quite important, to have that kind of cluster.?

CD: I think so and especially at the research level we need to excel in our own discipline but it will be interesting to see the cross discipline, and location and facilities are very important for that.

YD: The last question, what aspect of your career gives you the most satisfaction... or the least, whichever one you want to answer?

CD: I can say what the least is! Sometimes there's too much admin and it is the balance of that. I do love teaching, I also love doing my own work, working with colleagues. I am at my best when I'm working in the chamber music context or new music context. I like to be challenged. I still like to go in and say maybe I won't be able to do this, to find my way around it. I like to work on my own CD projects and repertoire and researching all of that, I love that area. And I love working with the next generation coming up.

YD: It sounds exhausting; you, obviously, have tons of energy!

CD: To balance it all is probably the most difficult part, since you have to do things that are at a very high level, you have to be clever about things.

YD: Be top of your game which I think you probably are!

Thanks -very much, Cliona.